

It Never Did

Ronald (Badgie) Courtoreille

The family arrived in July of 1949. My dad had been up here at least one possibly two seasons prior to that. In talking with one of our uncles he seems to recall that he came up here in the summer of '48 hauling lumber up here. According to him my dad had been here a couple of summers prior to that. So my dad could have come up here for the first time as early as 1946. He definitely was here in '48 and the rest of the family moved up in 1949.

I remember very little of the drive from Alberta. I was four and a half years old. We could have been pulling our boat on a trailer behind. Anything I remember of the drive was going down the Peace River hill. I wasn't very tall. So I couldn't see over the side of the truck box. I tried several times. I remember that scary ride going down the hill. I sat down quickly.

We came in the back of a truck driven by Jerry Eyford and there were two other families with us, the McDermotts and the LaTannes. I think we had a bunch of kids and dogs, you name it, in the back of the truck. I recall correctly we arrived at the West Channel very early in the morning like five or six o'clock. We left Faust, Alberta the previous day and drove all day and all night. At that time there were five of us kids, two boys and three girls.

It was the commercial fishing that brought us here. My dad fished Lesser Slave Lake as well as a number of other things. He did a little bit of mink farming and trapping back in the Slave Lake country. But he primarily fished and then moved up here to fish back in the late forties. He fished until the mid sixties. He dabbled a little bit here and there after that but basically once the mid sixties rolled around that was the end of his fishing days when he went to work for Northern Transportation.

As kids we all worked in the fishing industry or industry related to fishing. Most summers we nailed boxes, worked around the fish plants sometimes without pay. Most of us kids, the older kids anyway, worked at Godwin's store at the West Channel at given points in our lives. All of the boys fished with our dad and I still have a couple of brothers that fish through their employment or through just going out on the lake and helping relatives fish more as a hobby than anything else; certainly not a livelihood.

In the summer time when we first got there we had a tent frame to live in. When my dad was fishing for Alaska Fisheries, they had an empty office and cookhouse where they fed their men in the summer. We got to stay in there for one or two winters. Then my dad built the house.

We all grew up in the West Channel. The whole family lived in this log house that my dad had built around 1950. I think the house might have been fifteen by thirty feet and then we added on. At some point in time there were as many as ten and twelve of us living in two large rooms in this log house. We always seemed to find room for sleep overs, kids coming over to spend the weekend with us from three doors down or relatives visiting us. We always seemed to make room for somebody in this big house of ours with the big family. There are twelve children, ten still living-five boys and five girls. Our oldest brother and his wife died in a house fire in the West Channel in 1963 six weeks after they were married. Then we had a baby brother who drowned at the East Arm.

We were encouraged to participate in sports. If there were ball or hockey games, we participated in that. We used to have ball games at the West Channel in front of our house. Most of the kids would be playing in it and so would the fishermen, just a scrub game. We'd do that several nights a week.

Every summer we went to the different fish camps around Great Slave Lake. My dad would load the whole family up on his fish boat take us across to Moraine Bay and Dawson's Landing the Outpost Islands near Yellowknife, Utsini Point on the East Arm, Beaver Narrows on the East Arm. Our early years were spent going out to the fish camps every summer. There my mother and us kids would make fish boxes and my dad would fish. As us boys got older, we helped fish.

I think growing up in the West Channel in some ways was great. We were away from the rest of the town. We didn't have a lot of the things that were available downtown. We still had restaurants and things like that. There were enough kids there that we could usually form hockey teams and ball teams and go and play against the people in what we referred to as the Old Town. Back then it was the town proper.

We made our own entertainment. One of the funniest things we used to do was when the ptarmigan would come around there, we'd chase them with sticks and kill the odd one just throwing sticks at it. When we grew older and we were allowed to use firearms, we sometimes hunted right on the main road at the West Channel; things you'd never think of doing today. There seemed to be more game around back then than there is now. Primarily all we did was hunt chickens and ptarmigan in the wintertime. Of course, we didn't have TV back then. We were always outside playing games. It seemed like we had more snow back then. A few times the road to town would get blown in and we'd miss a day or two of school until they opened the road. We'd dig tunnels in the snow banks or play on the fish boats because they all got pulled up for the winter. We skated. We cleared off the sloughs in the back of the West Channel or some ice right on the West Channel. It was pretty laid back.

Of course, there were a few tragedies here and there with the fishermen getting killed in their occupation, some people dying out on the lake and some having very close calls. There have been a couple of incidents where they've gone out this time of the year (early December) and they've had their fish camps out there and the ice has broken away from the shore and floated around. You'd have the odd fish camp floating around on an ice floe.

The West Channel could be busy depending on the season. There were at least five fish companies operating in the winter for sure. The main fish buyers were Alaska Fisheries, Gateways, Kutcher & Trefiak, and Carter Fisheries. Then in the wintertime you'd have Bulmer, Clark. Later on, we had Bushman's. When we first arrived, probably at day one back in the late 40's, there were several other companies I don't recall much of. I recall Inland. There were two fish companies in the town proper, (now the Old Town), Menzie and McGinnis. The rest of the fish buyers were relegated to the West Channel. I think that decision was made back in 1947 or '48 by the local town administration. They didn't want all the fish companies located on the main channel. Menzie's was located close to the mouth where ATL (Arctic Transportation Limited) eventually had their offices.



When you look back now and thinking what there is today and coming here in the late '40s when there wasn't much of road, we've come a long way. There certainly was a road, but at certain times of the year it wasn't really all that passable. You could certainly say we were pioneering. It was several years before we got to go back south again. We didn't go back as a family. I think I was seventeen years old when I first went south.

My parents' contribution to the community would be that most of their children are still here, each in their own way, involved in the community. All but two family members are here. This would be my parents' contribution to the community. If that's a measure of my parents' involvement in the community, I guess we're it. If anything, what our parents did was to instill the spirit in the kids about getting involved in the community. Our family, along with many other people, are involved in the West Channel Heritage Committee and it has grown into Heritage Days with many more people involved. We get five hundred at the fish fry and two or three hundred around on the weekend. I dare say we bring close to one hundred people into town. It's a good celebration.

My parents worked hard. They had commitment and they stayed and we're still here. When they fished, the first couple of winters, my mother went out and physically fished with my dad. They used a dog team. Not everybody had a Bombardier. There was a lot fishing by dog team back then. As the different fish companies got Bombardiers, they'd haul a camp out and a fishing outfit out somewhere and leave them there and come back every so many days, pick up their fish and bring them back to the fish plants. The fishermen would stay out for a month or two at a time. My dad would leave in early December and quite often would not even come home for Christmas, but he would make it home for New Years. Christmas wasn't the big celebration in our house. New Years was the celebration for us. Christmas was a celebration for the kids.

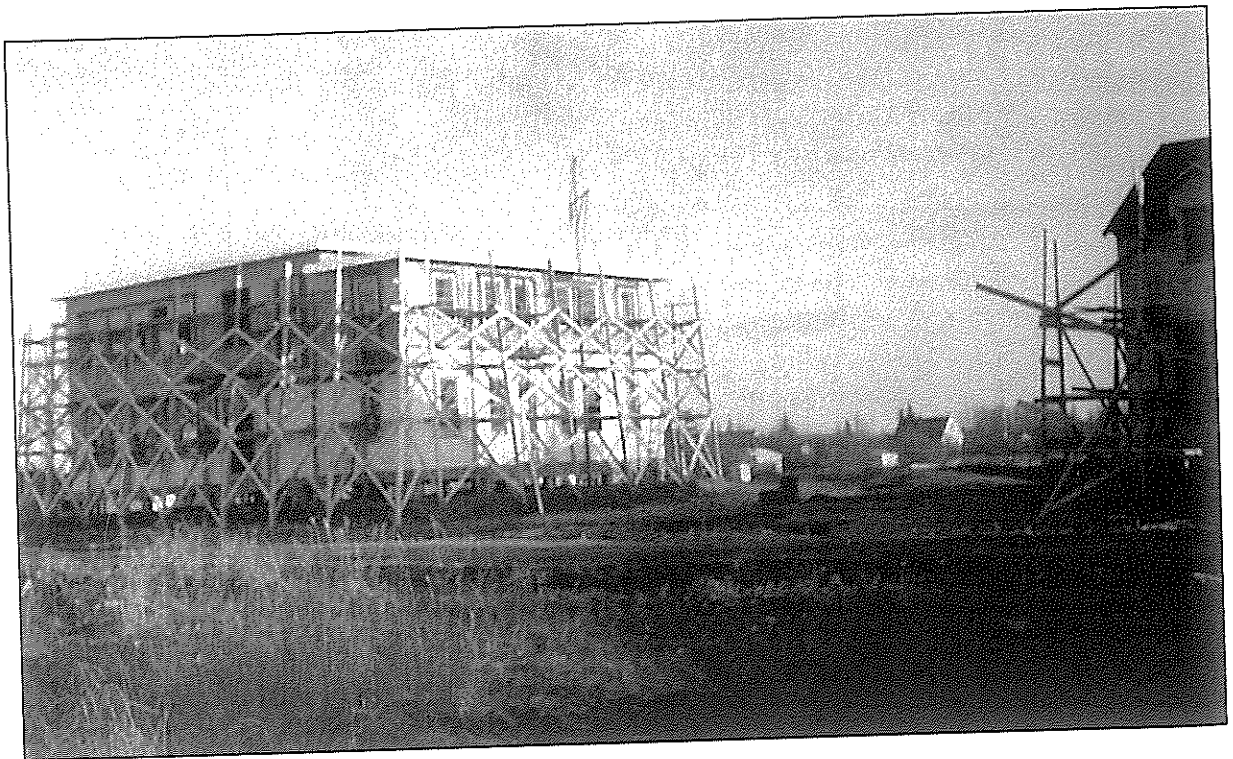
My mother did laundry for the family. On top of that she took in laundry for some of the fishermen and charged them for washing their clothes. Then in her spare time she'd work at the fish plant, help make fish boxes and things like that. The sense of working, they instilled that in us all, that you have to work. And we've all been working right from a very young age. I see the younger generation coming up now. Things are much easier for the kids. We tend to do that for our kids. Things were easier for us than they were for our parents. They worked hard to provide that for us. We in turn try to provide things for our kids and hopefully that will be passed on. When I look at how we were raised fairly strict, I tended to pass that on with the raising of our kids. One of the things you do with people, you got to keep them busy.

I remember one of the big things in our life. We got electricity fairly early. When we first came, it was all gasoline or kerosene lights and heaters and primarily wood stoves. Well, we got electricity fairly early. Then we went to a propane cook stove and wood for heat. We were just chuckling the other day, my sister Marina and I, about how when we got a new bottle of propane hooked up to the cook stove, one of us would stand by the propane tank turn it on and holler loud as we could. As soon as we hollered somebody inside would light the pilot lights so it wouldn't blow the house up, thinking that if the pilot light wasn't lit

right away, it would blow the house up. If you were by yourself, you'd turn it on then run as fast as you could to get into the house to light the pilot light. Later, I went into the propane industry and worked in it for a number of years. I always chuckle because you have a while to light the pilot light.

Prior to getting electricity my mother, of course, washed clothes by hand and then she got a gas-powered washing machine. We used to get quite a charge out of. Some of the safety features built into things nowadays weren't there back then. We had the washing machine in the one room where the bedroom would be and we'd have a flex hose on the exhaust and push it through a hole in the wall so we would get the exhaust on the outside. She pioneered all these things. When you think back about some of these things, you just shake your head. It's a wonder we didn't burn the house down, or gas somebody or, for that matter, drown out on the lake because when we went out to the fish camps we went on my dad's boat. We weren't unique; everybody did this. You could have ten or twelve people in a boat. There were maybe one or two life preservers on the boat for the fishermen. In most cases, there was never a lifeboat. In the early days none of the fish boats had lifeboats on them.

When we came here it wasn't to stay, at least in the kids' minds. In our minds we were going to go back. Our dad was here to stay. We used to ask when are we going back. He'd say, "When my hair grows back." It never did.



*Indian Day School later called Federal Day School. Under construction Sept. '48
Donor unknown*